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ABSTRACT

An academic librarian who is a Vietnam War veteran was inspired by the exemplary collection of Vietnam War literature at the Colorado State University Library to begin his own personal collection of mass market paperbacks dealing with the Vietnam War. Although Vietnam War fiction was common on the mass market racks in the mid 1980s, it has been replaced by the Vietnam memoir. A noticeable trend is books written and published by Vietnam veterans in their 50s who have been financially successful, have retired, and now have the time to tell their own special story, often in the form of fiction. A big help in finding Vietnam fiction is the Internet, but Marc Leeson's column in "The VVA Veteran" is the best single source. The narrator/librarian also refers to the three books he has written about his Vietnam experiences, "REMF Diary," "The REMF Returns," and "In the Army Now." Although he set out to be a war novelist and not the bibliographer that he is, he finds himself annotating Vietnam War literature for the third edition of John Newman's "Bibliography"--studying Newman's annotations and modeling his own on them. In the meantime, most of the books he has accumulated are either in the Joe Hooper Collection at Green River Community College or in his own bookroom. (NKA)

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1. THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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(SHOW TITLE SLIDE)

Popular Culture Association/American Cultural Association Convention

San Diego, California

10:30 am, Friday, 2 April 1999

A REMF's View of Viet Nam War Literature Bibliography

by David A. Willson

(SHOW SLIDE OF BEER CAN BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD)

Whenever I see a beer or pop can by the side of the road, I am compelled by my inner
demons to seriously consider swerving **(SHOW SLIDE OF MY MINIVAN)** my
minivan onto the shoulder in an attempt to nail that can, to flatten it for all eternity.
Many of the things my inner demons tell me to do, I wonder, where did that come from?
With this one I know where. My father, **(SHOW SLIDE OF MY FATHER)** my old
man. The man who studied mathematics at Stanford with **(SHOW SLIDE OF POLYA
BOOKS)** Georg Polya. **(SHOW ANOTHER SLIDE OF MY FATHER)** Many's
the time he swerved the family automobile—it didn't matter if it was a Hudson Hornet or
the 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air—he never kept any car very long—he'd swerve that car and
nail a can on the side of the road.

If my mother asked him why he did that his answer was always the same, "It comforts
me to know where my tires are," he'd say. They are on the road, I felt like saying from
the back seat. But I didn't want to rob my father of the small comfort he'd just achieved.

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For my father was a hard man to comfort. He was a hard man to connect with at all.

My theory on why the act of running over a can comforted him a bit, is that it was his way of taking some control over the chaos which ruled his universe. He could have stopped his car and picked up the can, taken it with him, "collected" it. But he wasn't the sort to slow down, let alone stop.

I am very much my father's son in most ways. But I do slow down, stop and collect.

(SHOW SLIDE OF BOOK COVER)

Werner Muensterberger in his fine book, Collecting: An Unruly Passion, Psychological Perspectives has the following to say about people like me: "Observing collectors, one soon discovers an unrelenting need, even hunger, for acquisitions. This ongoing search is a core element of their personality. It is linked to far deeper roots. It turns out to be a tendency which derives from a not immediately discernible sense memory of deprivation or loss or vulnerability and a subsequent longing for substitution, closely allied with moodiness and depressive leanings." p. 3

One summer, the summer of 1985, my depressive leanings were getting beyond my control. I was in one of those recurring human conditions that I call "Love is hard." Luckily, I had visited John Newman and the CSU Collection in Fort Collins, Colorado a few months earlier. I had spent a lot of time scrutinizing the book covers, especially the paperbacks, trying to discover what recurring visual motifs there were if any.

(SHOW A FEW SLIDES OF CLOSEUPS OF MOTIF ELEMENTS IN COVERS - GET THEM FROM SWIRLING MAELSTROM BOX)

I jotted down a bunch of notes and stored them away for a rainy day. That rainy day finally came and the groundwork I'd done at CSU came in handy. I felt I was breaking down. I couldn't focus on anything. Reading much of anything was beyond me. Writing was out of the question. I desperately needed a simple repetitive task to keep me busy. I took stock of my situation. I made a list. 1. I am a librarian. 2. I'm a Viet Nam Veteran. 3. I've always collected things. 4. I've visited the CSU Collection of Viet Nam War Literature. 5. I'm going nuts, suffering a personal cataclysm. Call it a breakdown, an epiphany of realization. Like Saul on the Damascus Road. Or Kerouac On the Road. Whatever. But the time was right for me to do something or I was lost.

That summer I spent hundreds of hours in bookstores searching for Viet Nam War paperbacks of the mass market variety. I found a bunch of them. When Fall came, I was no longer as suicidal as I'd been, so I kept collecting Viet Nam War books. Maybe I was afraid that collecting them was all that kept the demons at bay. Here are slides of some of the books I found many copies of in those early days.

(SHOW SLIDES OF EARLY PAPERBACK BOOKS)

I concentrated on a fine-tooth comb search of all the paperback exchanges I could locate in the Seattle-Tacoma area. I went as far north as Vancouver BC and south to Depoe Bay, Oregon. I used the Yellow Pages to locate the paperback stores, and then I visited them one at a time, sometimes taking hours to look through their stock. The

paperback stores near military bases such as Fort Lewis provided especially good pickings.

The Vancouver stores were especially good for British Imprints, although there were pleasant surprises in Canada such as the time I discovered on a sale table for 50 cents each a dozen or so copies of McAvoy Layne's scarce 1973 paperback original How Audie Murphy Died in Vietnam. **(SHOW SLIDE OF THIS BOOK)**

For about ten years I kept doing what I described above. I carried my baby son Joaquin in and out of so many bookstores, that his first word, clearly enunciated when we were in front of a rack of paperbacks in Albertson's supermarket was, "book."

When I first started my aggressive search the summer of 1985, I would enter a bookstore, approach the person at the counter and ask if they had a war section, or a Viet Nam section. Usually they'd tell me or show me. Occasionally I'd run into a person who resented my goal. I well remember an incident at a store in Olympia. The young woman said, "No, but we have books on peace. Would you like to see them?" I muttered something vague and said I'd just browse. I found several Viet Nam War paperbacks which the young woman reluctantly sold me.

When there was a section devoted to the Viet Nam War rarely were there fiction or poetry or drama books in that section. Usually just non-fiction was shelved there. There are four exceptional bookstores in the Seattle-Tacoma area which specialize in Viet Nam War literature and have done much to help me obtain hard-to-find or unknown items: Tacoma Book Center, Gregor Books, Comstock Books and Recollection Books. But usually the Viet Nam War novels and poetry would have to be winkled out of the general

areas which was extremely time-consuming. But that was my goal at first - to consume my time.

In the mid 1980's Viet Nam War fiction was common on the mass market racks in supermarkets. The large publishing houses were producing serious Viet Nam war fiction of the literary sort. Little Viet Nam War fiction is found on the whirly racks these days, having been replaced by the Viet Nam memoir - mostly about the exploits of LURPs, SEALs or Green Berets. I've never found a REMF memoir on a mass market rack.

Literary fiction often has a Viet Nam War related element but rarely qualifies as a Viet Nam War novel. Where have the Viet Nam War novels gone? Are they extinct? In a sense. The small independent publishers have taken over. Call them "obscure" rather than independent, if you like. A special effort has to be made to find these books, but they continue to make it into print. **(SHOW SLIDES OF OBSCURE PAPERBACKS)**

A trend I've noticed lately is that books are being written and published by Viet Nam veterans in their 50's who have been financially successful in their lives since Viet Nam, have retired and have the time to tell their own special story, often in the form of fiction.

**(SHOW A FEW SLIDES OF COVERS OF BOOKS WRITTEN
BY SUCCESSFUL VETS IN THEIR 50'S)**

What sort of special effort has to be made to find these books? I read every issue of *Publisher's Weekly*, *Library Journal*, *Vietnam Magazine*, paying special attention to the book ads. The Internet is a big help. But Marc Leepson's column in *The VVA Veteran* is the best single source.

(SHOW LEEPSON SLIDE) When I asked Marc about the current state of Viet Nam War literature he had the following to say: "It's almost an extinct species—except for the whizz-bang, mass market paperback shoot em ups, which I can't take seriously as fiction but which come out regularly, most often involving SEALs or Green Berets. I'd say I see maybe one or two attempts at serious Vietnam War novels a year, often from university presses, of all places. I'd say the Vietnam War novel is being avoided almost completely by big trade presses. Nearly all of the fiction that deals with the war is set in the present day and includes war time flashbacks. There is no shortage of serious literary books that have screwed-up Vietnam veterans as characters, although that situation is most common in thrillers and detectives."

Also, I receive and read all the publishers catalogs I can get my hands on and I get catalogs from those few dealers who specialize in Viet Nam War literature. I also read every other magazine which reviews books.

All of the above relates to my being a collector of Viet Nam War literature. The title of this presentation is "A REMF's View of Viet Nam War Bibliography." What's that all about? The REMF label relates to the three books I've written about my 21 months in the U.S. Army: REMF Diary, The REMF Returns and In The Army Now.

(SHOW SLIDES OF MY BOOK COVERS)

I seem to be the only one of the millions who served in the rear with the beer and the gear in Viet Nam who wished to step forward and tell about that special experience by writing

novels about it. I'd wanted to be a war novelist since my boyhood when I'd read the war novels of Herman Wouk, James Jones and Ernest Hemingway.

I'd never sought to be a bibliographer. The first one I'd encountered in person was Professor Donna Gerstenberger at the University of Washington, and I'd ridiculed her to her face for her bibliographic efforts: The American Novel, 1789-1959. I asked her, couldn't you write a novel? Before she could answer, I'd then asked her, "How hard can it be to make a list of books on a subject and write a few sentences about each one?" I'd asked her that question in 1964. It didn't help my grade in the American Lit. class I was taking from her.

Now it was thirty years later and John Newman was asking me to take over a small part of the duties of annotating Viet Nam War novels for the third edition of his bibliography. I asked myself that same question - "How hard could it be?" and told John, "Sure, I'll do a few." After all, I'd read most of the books already. That was the hard part, I thought. It's a thin line between being a Viet Nam War literature collector and being a Viet Nam War literature bibliographer. After many, many painful months of effort, I decided that if there was a line, it was a thin red line made red by the many little beads of blood which gathered on my forehead during the process of trying to learn how to write annotations.

I started by reading a few of John Newman's annotations. **(SHOW SLIDES OF NEWMAN'S ANNOTATIONS)** Then I got some file cards and wrote annotations for the many books I'd read already. I did that for a few weeks. Then I sat down and read them. They were awful. Then I got out Newman's Bibliography and read some of his

annotations. His were great. Mine stunk. Somehow I'd failed to consistently include even the basic elements of an annotation. When during the War? What branch of service? Where in Viet Nam? How does the book deal with the above?

As for wit, forget about it! I tore up all my annotations, took stock of my situation and went to school on John Newman's annotations. I read them. I analyzed them.

I wrote them out word for word in longhand. I broke dozens of them down into basic elements. I started over. I reread all of the books. Some of them I read as many as three times. I sweated blood. My goal was to become John Newman as much as I could, to get inside his skin, to see this process through his eyes. I wanted to finish this project, to do my part the best I could, to meet my deadline and to then never annotate another book,

ever. **(SHOW SLIDE OF COVER OF ELISE TITLE'S TILL THE END OF TIME -**

TALK ABOUT COVER ELEMENTS, THEN READ MY ANNOTATION)

Title, Elise. *Till the end of Time*. Toronto: Harlequin Books, 1991. 253 pp. ISBN 0-373-16377-0.

Childhood friends Annie Magill and David Nichols end up serving in the military in Vietnam at the same time (1968) and in the same place (Long Binh). After all this is a Harlequin romance. For what it is, it is not bad. Annie is an Army nurse at the 24th Evac Hospital and David is an Army captain "in an especially dangerous and secret Army engineering unit." After much adventure and danger Annie and David get back home almost in good shape (he must wear a piratical eye patch) and decide to marry and adopt a cute little Vietnamese orphan named Tai.

I'd been a collector of Viet Nam War books because my inner demons drove me to collect. I told myself I was saving these books from an undeserved oblivion. My respect for a demon exterior to me compelled me to transmogrify into a bibliographer. Now I know that the task of saving books is not complete until the book has been annotated.

Before, they were languishing unknown in my private collection. They had not truly dodged oblivion until they were annotated and included in THE Bibliography.

(SHOW SLIDES OF 3rd EDITION)

(SHOW SLIDES OF JOE HOOPER COLLECTION AND SLIDES OF BOOKROOM)

Most of the books I've accumulated are either in the Joe Hooper Collection at Green River Community College or are in my bookroom in my home in Maple Valley. Visitors are welcome in either place by appointment.

My counselor has suggested that perhaps I've saved some books from a well-deserved oblivion. I cannot accept that. I hope none of you do, either. I now think of bibliography as a brave denial of the ultimate futility of all human effort.